

# Quechan Indians Boast Long Colorado River History

**I**nhabitants of Southwestern Arizona for thousands of years, Yuma, Arizona's Quechan Indian tribe resides today on a 44,000-acre reservation on the California side of the Colorado River and maintains a close relationship with the terrain of U.S. Army Yuma Proving Ground. This relationship is recognized and nurtured by proving ground officials, who arrange tours for tribal members and frequently consult with them on cultural resource issues.

Quechan tribal lore explains the tribe descended from the heights of Avikwame Mountain (Newberry Peak, near Needles, Calif.) The tribe's history revolves along the banks of the once mighty and somewhat unpredictable river.

The Colorado River used to be one of the most sediment-filled rivers in the world, particularly when it reached Yuma County. Almost every spring, the river would flood with melting snow and overflow its banks, depositing tons of rich soil. This flood plain was extremely fertile, a quality the Quechan Indians actively exploited through farming.

The Quechan people produced about half of their food through farming. Their farming patterns

and techniques were determined by the flooding pattern of the river. Usually in June or early July of each year, entire families moved out into the fields to plant seeds for crops. The men did the heavier work, but everyone pitched in to help. They raised wheat, beans, corn, squash, and a variety of melons. There was no need to fertilize, for there was a wealth of minerals and nutrients in the rich river silt.

Hunting, fishing and food gathering

also formed important parts of the Quechan diet. Men hunted rabbits, deer and birds throughout the year, but the Colorado River's abundant fish population made up the major source of animal protein in their diet. They used hooks and lines, but also baskets, nets and fences to trap salmon, bass and other fish. The bean pods of the mesquite and screw bean trees were probably the most important wild foods gathered by the women and children of the tribe. The pods were dried, then the beans were ground into meal and formed into cakes.

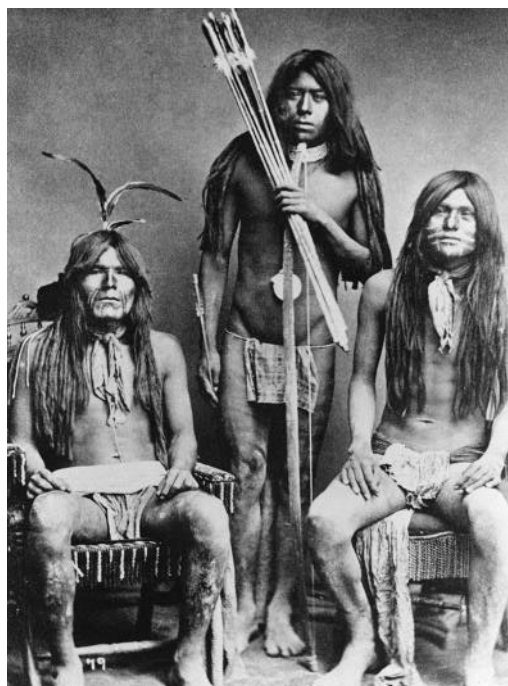
The Quechan Indians led a nomadic, generally peaceful, lifestyle. They roamed as far away as the interior of California, even visiting the seashore, and going as far as Phoenix in the opposite direction. They lived in several separate settlements rather than in a single large village. Each settlement consisted of several hundred people, each of whom belonged to a household consisting of a large extended family. These households were practical social units, for the river bottomlands could only be farmed successfully by a fairly large group of people working together. Possibly the largest and most permanent of these settlements was located at the foot of nearby Pilot Knob, located on the United States/Mexico border. The Spanish estimated the population of this village in 1774 as more than 800 residents.

Tribal members constructed dome-shaped huts of brush in which to live. A covered ramada was built next to each hut, both for shade and to provide food storage.

Warfare played a significant role in Quechan history. In addition to fighting to control trade and good river bottomland, they battled other tribes to take captives. War was viewed as a way to strengthen the tribe's spiritual power and demonstrate it to others. The tribe usually allied with the Mojave Indians, and by the 1700s, they had driven their enemies away from the Colorado River and remained in sole control of this vital resource.

The Spanish first visited the Yuma area in 1540, drawn to the region by tales of fabulous stores of gold and other riches. The Quechan Indians first had contact with the Spaniards in 1603, when 30 soldiers and two priests under Juan de Onate visited. The inhabitants welcomed

*Quechan warriors posing for E.A. Bonine, photographer, in 1880. Photo courtesy U.S. Army Yuma Proving Ground.*



the Spanish, but had little contact with them throughout most of the next century.

The Spanish increased their contact with the Quechans throughout the 1700s, attempting both to control the strategic Yuma crossing of the Colorado River and convert them to Christianity. In 1781, the Quechans rebelled, fed up with Spanish colonialism. They destroyed the nearby Spanish settlement, killing 55 and taking at least 76 captive. This resulted in the Spanish not being able to properly support its colonies in California and freedom from dominating outside influences until the mid-1800s.

As controllers of Yuma's crossing of the Colorado River, the Quechans operated a ferry carrying passengers, supplies and livestock over the river. But the discovery of gold in California, and the resultant boom in ferry profits, spelled doom for Quechan operation of the service. American ferry companies went into operation as competitors and their own customers plundered Quechan fields and food supplies, leaving the Indians with little to eat. When United States military forces came to Yuma in 1852, Quechan power rapidly diminished and was destroyed.

In 1884, the Fort Yuma Reservation was formed as home for the Quechan tribe. Although the 44,000 acre tract of land was large, it was only a small portion of the territory the tribe previously controlled. Besides that, the land closest to the river was fertile, but the soil in the northwest portion of the reservation was alkaline, with too much salt for successful farming. A few years later, the land was divided up and individual plots were given to each member of the tribe in an attempt to encourage individual farming. Surplus land was auctioned to others, which caused the Quechans to lose control of some of the richest land. Free irrigation water, though promised, was never provided.

Today, the Quechan Reservation is the second largest Indian reservation in California. There are about 2,500 Quechans today, which is a decrease from the over 4,000 who existed when Spanish contact was first made.

The entire U.S. Army Yuma Proving Ground area was frequently visited by the Quechan people during the tribe's heyday. Pauline Owl, Quechan Cultural Resources Manager and direct descendent of tribal Chief Pasqual of the late 1800s, says people can still see remnants of their passage.

"You can see pottery shards, sleeping circles (circles of rocks) and areas of petroglyphs," she explained. "Some of the rock art we can still read today. One carving might show a picture of an animal that had been spotted. Another might be a

family name. Yet another might be religious in nature. What is now Yuma Proving Ground is important to us, for that was once part of the home for our forefathers—it is an inheritance from them."

According to Pauline Jose, Quechan Museum Director, large numbers of the tribe have bravely served in our nation's military throughout this century. "We have an active veterans organization here at the reservation, American Legion Post 802, and count nearly 500 veterans of military service this century," she said. "Our people have sacrificed along with other Americans for their country."

Owl says tribal representatives have met with Yuma Proving Ground officials on several occasions to discuss historical preservation matters. She views these past meetings as having been positive and hopes for them to continue. She has particularly high praise for the museum display in the Yuma Proving Ground Range Operations Center's central courtyard.

"It's important that we recognize and respect their interest and place in the land," said Dolores Gauna, Yuma Proving Ground cultural resources manager. "They were here long before us and we need to keep that in mind."

Gauna says the relationship between the proving ground and local Indian tribes has dramatically improved in recent years, as a number of positive two-way programs have been instituted.

"We hold regular consultation meetings here at Yuma Proving Ground, plus we frequently visit tribal officials in their offices," explained Gauna. "We recently dedicated a newly constructed building here in honor of a member of another local tribe, Sgt. Bravie Soto, and regularly publish educational articles in our post newspaper for the benefit of the workforce. The intention of everything we do is to develop and maintain a close relationship based on respect, cooperation and understanding."

The Quechan Indians make up part of the rich historic legacy of Yuma Proving Ground and the desert southwest. Their story must not be forgotten, for the lessons of the past can teach us a great deal about the challenges of the future.

*Chuck Wullenjohn is Chief, Yuma Proving Ground Public Affairs Office.*

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